

CLAIM AMENDMENTS

Listing of claims:

This listing of claims replaces all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

1. **(Currently Amended)** A composition suitable for forming cheese, said composition comprising a starter acidification culture and an exopolysaccharide (EPS) fermentation culture wherein said EPS culture contains a viable lactic acid ~~microorganism~~ microorganism selected from the group consisting of *Streptococcus thermophilus* V3, *Lactococcus lactis* ssp *cremoris* 322, *Lactobacillus sakei* 570, and *Leuconostoc mesenteroides* 808, wherein said lactic acid ~~microorganism~~ microorganism is capable of producing an enzyme, and wherein said enzyme is capable of producing an EPS.
2. **(Currently Amended)** A composition according to claim 1 wherein the starter acidification culture comprises a ~~microorganism~~ microorganism that is capable of fermenting lactic acid.
3. **(Original)** A composition according to claim 2 wherein said starter acidification culture is a culture of a lactic acid bacterium.

Claims 4-5. **(Cancelled)**

6. **(Currently Amended)** A composition according to claim 1 wherein ~~said~~ EPS production occurs separately from acidification by said starter acidification culture.
7. **(Currently Amended)** A composition according to claim 6 wherein ~~the~~ EPS is produced *in situ*.

8. **(Original)** A composition according to claim 7 wherein said EPS is produced in the presence of a suitable enzyme substrate selected from the group consisting of sucrose, fructose, glucose, maltose, lactose, stacchiose, raffinose and verbascose.
9. **(Original)** A composition according to claim 8, wherein the EPS is a hetero-EPS.
10. **(Currently Amended)** A composition according to claim 9, wherein the lactic acid ~~microorganism~~ microorganism of the EPS fermentation culture is *Streptococcus thermophilus* V3.
11. **(Currently Amended)** A composition according to claim 9 wherein the lactic acid ~~microorganism~~ microorganism is *Lactococcus lactis* ssp. *cremoris* 322.
12. **(Original)** A composition according to claim 7, wherein the EPS is a homo-EPS.
13. **(Cancelled)**
14. **(Currently Amended)** A composition according to claim ~~[[13]]~~ 12, wherein the lactic acid bacterium of the EPS fermentation culture is *Lactobacillus sakei* 570.
15. **(Currently Amended)** A composition according to claim ~~[[13]]~~ 12, wherein the lactic acid bacterium of the EPS fermentation culture is *Leuconostoc mesenteroides* 808.
16. **(Currently Amended)** A process of preparing ~~Use of a composition to prepare a~~ cheese product comprising adding to a medium suitable for forming cheese, a composition according to claim 1, wherein the ~~composition comprises a starter acidification culture and an~~ EPS fermentation culture ~~wherein said EPS fermentation culture contains a viable lactic acid~~ microorganism ~~microorganism of said composition produces, wherein said lactic acid micro-~~ organism is capable of producing an enzyme, and wherein said enzyme is capable of ~~producing~~ an EPS.

17. **(Currently Amended)** A cheese product prepared by the process of claim 16, wherein said cheese product comprises ~~using~~ the composition according to claim 1.
18. **(Original)** A cheese product according to claim 17 wherein the cheese product is a soft cheese product.
19. **(Currently Amended)** A process cheese product according to claim ~~[[18]]~~ 16 wherein said EPS is capable of modulating the moisture level of said product.
20. **(Currently Amended)** A process cheese product according to claim ~~[[19]]~~ 16 wherein the target moisture is capable of being achieved by optimising whey release during curd processing.
21. **(Currently Amended)** A process cheese product according to claim ~~[[17]]~~ 16 wherein said EPS increases the stability and/or elasticity of said curd.
22. **(Cancelled)**
23. **(Currently Amended)** A process cheese product according to claim ~~[[22]]~~ 21 wherein said curd is capable of being manipulated with conventional curd manipulating equipment.
24. **(Previously Presented)** A cheese product according to claim 17 wherein said EPS is capable of forming a cheese curd containing about 50% moisture level.
25. **(Original)** A cheese product according to claim 24, wherein said curd has less than 5% loss in moisture during ripening to a cheese product.
26. **(Currently Amended)** A process cheese product according to claim ~~[[17]]~~ 16 wherein said EPS is capable of improving at least one of the texture, aroma, flavour, mildness,

consistency, body, mouth feel, firmness, viscosity, gel fracture, wheying off, syneresis, structure and/or organoleptic properties, nutrition and/or health benefits of the cheese product.

27. **(Currently Amended)** A method for forming a cheese ~~the method~~ comprising admixing a composition with a medium suitable for forming cheese so as to form a cheese curd containing about 50% moisture and wherein during ripening of the cheese product less than about 5% moisture is lost; wherein the composition is a composition according to claim 1.

28. **(Original)** A cheese product obtained according to the method of claim 27.

29. **(Cancelled)**

30. **(Currently Amended)** A process for *in situ* production of an EPS comprising the steps of:

- providing a composition according to claim 1, and
- permitting growth of said ~~microorganism~~ microorganism so as to produce the EPS, ~~and~~
- ~~optionally isolating said EPS.~~

31. **(Original)** A process according to claim 30 wherein said EPS is a homo-EPS.

32. **(Currently Amended)** A process according to claim 30 wherein the ~~microorganism~~ microorganism is *Lactobacillus sakei* 570.

Claims 33-36. **(Cancelled)**

37. **(Currently Amended)** A culture of *Lactobacillus sakei* strain 570 deposited as DSM 15889 at the Deutsche Sammlung von Mikroorganismen und Zellkulturen GmbH.

38. **(Cancelled)**